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My Father the Wrestler as a Socio-cultural Icon or Papa, the Big Frenchman

Marie-Ginette Baillargeon

1 It is only in retrospect that I have begun to think of my father, Adrien Baillargeon as a superhero and a socio-cultural icon. In his time, the words had not yet come of age. Nevertheless, the words superhero and socio-cultural icon fit him to a tee long before he became a professional wrestler. At first, the image of a superhero was more in the French Canadian tradition of the legendary Paul Bunyan (Stevens 2001). At 6'5" and a muscular 230 lbs, my father was a giant.

2 As a youth, like Paul Bunyan, my father had been a lumberjack and like Bunyan, Adrien Baillargeon was not an ordinary lumberjack. First his strength and ability in downing large trees, and then his agility, balance, and skill to walk across the floating logs on a fast down-stream river soon impressed the local population. Also like Paul Bunyan, my father crossed the Canadian Border, and by the early 1950's became a household name in the Northeastern part of the United States. As opposed to Bunyan, however, my father was now a professional wrestler and a living legend.

3 Although Paul Bunyan was not a wrestler, it is also my father's superhero status that makes him more akin to the French Canadian superhero than Roland Barthes' stereotype of the French wrestler in his *Mythologies* (Lavers 1972). Barthes, for example, opposes wrestling to judo, whereas he perceives latter as a sport and the first as a sum of spectacles (Lavers, 16). Having practiced judo for two years, I can vouch that wrestling, as it was practiced by my father, closely resembles judo and is in fact a sport. Was I good at judo? My sensei seemed to think so as he would have me do demos for his other classes. It was then, however, that I began to realize how difficult it is to think and act on your feet, and as a result, to really appreciate my father's amazing talents. There was no comparison between my modest efforts and his uncanny abilities. Some college wrestling coaches also respected professional wrestling as a sport when they invited my father to do demonstrations for their college wrestling teams.

4 Certainly my father's sportsmanship was a part of this equation. In fact, his sportsmanship was part and parcel of each match and it was undoubtedly his extraordinary display of sportsmanship that enabled this big French Canadian to cross many other borders such as the Mason Dixon line when he wrestled in places like Nashville, Tennessee, Atlanta, Georgia, Houston, Texas, and New Orleans, Louisiana. He would cross still another international border and popular cultural reality when he wrestled in Japan.

5 Indeed, in 1957, when Adrien Baillargeon wrestled sumo wrestlers in Japan, he may not have been the favorite, but contrary to the image of the *salaud* that Barthes paints in his analysis of the French wrestler, and contrary to Barthes' characterization of wrestling as a sum of spectacles, it was my father's extraordinary strength and agility as sports figure that had won him a contract in Japan where professional wrestling has long held a privileged place in popular culture. The monumentally large crowds attested to the superhero status of wrestlers in post war Japan. Before stadiums holding 100,000 spectators had become common-place, my father had wrestled before an audience of 100,000 in Japan; the place was the large crater that had resulted from the World War II bombing of Nagasaki. It was also while he was in Japan that he received an offer for a role in a Hollywood movie that was being filmed on site: *Teahouse of the August Moon*, starring Marlon Brando. He was still under contract to the wrestling office in California, however, and he declined the offer.

Baillargeon lifts host during a guest appearance on Japan's "I've Got a Secret"

6 There is yet another significant comparison between my father and the legendary French Canadian figure of the superhero, Paul Bunyan; like him, my father's fame was well-established in Quebec prior to crossing the border into the United States. My father was one of six brothers, all possessing unusual strength and talents, and the lore of the Baillargeon brothers had quickly spread throughout Quebec. One early story concerned my father and one of his brothers. The parish priest's car had, with the melting of winter snows, slipped off the road into a deep ditch. My father and his brother came to the rescue when they literally picked up the car and put it back on the road. This was in the early1940's when cars were made of heavy metals. It was also during this period that the Baillargeon brothers started to train with the Dion brothers and to perform in Vaudeville. Aside from forming a six-man pyramid and other balancing acts, they each performed a feat of sheer strength. Uncle Jean would tear the New York telephone book in two. Uncle Paul would climb a telephone pole, but he was not alone, he had a horse in tow. Uncle

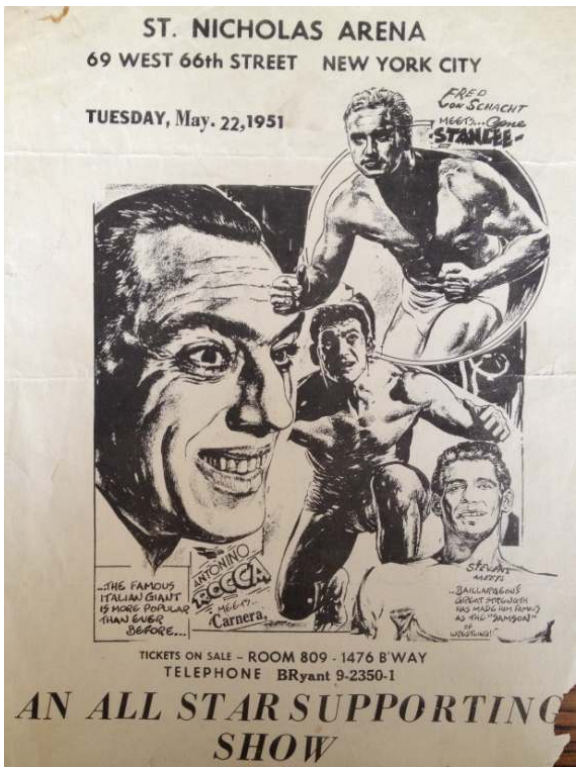
Charles pulled a bus with his teeth. My father lifted a heavy platform on his back. The platform weighed two hundred pounds, and with some seventeen heavy-set men on board, it usually weighed two tons ('Reportage d'époque sur les Baillargeon Anglais').

7 As the years passed, their fame continued to spread. On one of my trips to Quebec, some journalists recounted the story of a radio announcer who had told drivers to avoid driving over the Quebec Bridge because the Baillargeon brothers had carried it off on their shoulders.

8 By the late 1940's, the Baillargeon brothers decided to use their talents, not by picking up the Quebec Bridge and carrying it off of their shoulders, but by becoming professional wrestlers. They did not attend a school for professional wrestling, but rather learned the martial art, by coaching each another. Again, contrary to Roland Barthes' definition of the French professional wrestler, which opposed wrestling to judo, there was in my father's style a definite use of judo moves. My father clearly demonstrated measured gestures that correspond to Barthes' definition of judo as a sport. His gestures were precise but restricted, and drawn accurately but by a "stroke without volume" (Lavers 1972, p. 16). Still, as in Barthes' description of the French style of wrestling, which in this case also applies to the American style, there were excessive gestures that were exploited to the limit of their meaning (Lavers 1972, p.16). Certainly, my father's physique and rapport with the public played into the aspect of showmanship that characterizes professional wrestling in various cultures. Yet, at the end of the day, and in my father's case, it was the sport with its demonstrations of strength, agility, balance, and quick thinking rather than the mere spectacle that impressed the public.

9 Was he good? After having trained with his brothers, he had decided to try his luck in New York City where professional wrestling was enjoying great popularity in the early 1950's. Logic tells me that there was a bit more than luck involved when, by his third week in New York, he catapulted into fame in the Northeast United States when he wrestled in the main event at New York City's Madison Square Garden.

10 At first, the news media had called him *Samson of the Mat*, but the name that eventually stuck was that of the Big Frenchman. As a child I could be rather smug when I said to my friends: my daddy is stronger than your daddy, and I could get away with it because my father was appearing on television up to three times a week in the Northeastern part of the United States, and just about everyone knew who he was. More important, however, even then I knew that he was a source of inspiration to many people.



11 It is my father's inspirational role that made him so much more than a sport and show business person: he was a socio-cultural icon. His physique and strength represented an ideal of physical conditioning that has informed our conscious and subconscious psyche since Greco-Roman times. During his wrestling matches, this six foot five inch giant gave evidence of a balance and agility akin to that of Olympic gymnasts and people knew that they were witnessing an extraordinary display of human ability. What is more, in the traditional representation between good and evil, he was the quintessential good guy, a force for good even when others broke the rules and behaved badly. Thus, even when showmanship became a part of the wrestling match, he excelled at being the good sport.

12 Although his image as the good guy was at times enhanced by a name of biblical significance with which the media had christened him, *Samson of the mat*, neither the image of the good guy nor that of Samson was gratuitous. In a very real sense he earned both the good guy image and that of the iconic biblical figure. He may not have fought the philistines, but the drama that took place in the ring did represent the eternal struggle of good over evil that informs the human condition. There was another drama that unfolded in the ring. Although, my father barely spoke English in the early 50's, he was quick to establish a rapport with the audience through his wrestling strategies and gestures.

13 Within his repertoire of wrestling moves and holds, there were four elements that stood out over all the others in his matches, all of them crowd pleasers and most of them displays of strength, agility and balance.

14 There was the rocking nelson where he managed to overpower an opponent in such a manner as to be able to do pinwheels around the ring with him. This move again emphasized the sport aspect of his profession since it represented a mastery of wrestling technique rather than an opportunity to view what Barthes refers to as "as externalized image of torture" (Lavers 1972, p.20). The second iconic move was again a display of strength and agility when he lifted even a 300 lb. wrestler over his head and proceeded to spin with him. The crowds marveled at the rocking nelson move and the airplane spin. There was also an unusual evasive move he would execute to foil an opponent's attempt to put a hold on him. He would jump up and walk on the ropes that encircled the wrestling ring. These ropes were obviously lax, and that made the feat all the more impressive. Those manifestations of superior abilities would bring the house down. The public knew that they were witnessing something truly extraordinary in terms of strength, agility, and balance. Finally, in a classical manifestation of professional wrestling that more closely approximates Barthes' definition of the spectacle, at the end of the match when my father held his opponent at his mercy, he would look to the crowd in an appeal for their input as to how he should proceed (Lavers 1972, p. 21). It was as if ensuing victory belonged to everyone when he pinned his opponent down to the count of three with emphasis on his superior mastery of the sport rather than Barthes' notion of torture.

15 This big French Canadian, who wore his signature maple leaf on his robe, had indeed crossed both physical and cultural borders to become a socio-cultural icon when news media had baptized him as *Samson of the mat*, but more importantly, he had won the public's admiration and adulation on both sides of the border. His fan clubs quickly grew

and I remember feeling proud when he did strength exhibitions for boys clubs. In California, my father and his brother Paul were America's tag team champions. It was in Atlanta, Georgia, however, that newspapermen started calling him the Big Frenchman. Although, he always used his own name, Adrien Baillargeon, it was not an easy name for Americans to pronounce, but they remembered it, even if the pronunciation was Americanized to *By-ya-zhon* or *Bail-large-on*, and of course they remembered the big Frenchman.

16 It was in Louisiana towards the end of my father's wrestling career that he would be instrumental in transgressing an established negative socio cultural stereotype. In Louisiana, during a number of decades, and up till the 1960's, being Acadian, or Cajun as they are most often called, had become a derogatory denotation. The Cajuns were generally stigmatized for both their French language and their culture. Louisiana's former secretary of state, Wade Martin, took note of that period of negative stereotyping during his speech at the 1965 Acadian bicentennial celebration as he recalled that speaking French on school grounds had been a punishable act: "Unhappily, we must also mention that period in our history, now happily ended, when our children, and in fact, some of us here present, were punished for the offense of speaking in French while attending public schools (J. Louviere)." Dr. Barry Ancelet of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette recalled the effects of that political policy: "Older Cajuns, who had written 'I will not speak French on the school ground' a few thousand times, had learned the lesson well and avoided inflicting on their own children what was long considered a cultural and linguistic deficiency (346)."

17 My father, who had first wrestled in Lafayette, Louisiana in 1960, was already well known and well liked by the Cajun people when we moved to the area in 1962. He was, in fact, a heroic figure that had come to Lafayette from the outside, but had formed an instant bond with the people. My papa was French Canadian and spoke to them in French. It was evident to the Acadians that he valued them, their language, and their culture. What is more, the Big Frenchman's popularity across the board transgressed the racial and cultural lines of demarcation of the early 60's. Whether we were at the supermarket, the gas station, or a school event, people of all backgrounds would run up to my father and ask to shake his hand. For them, there was only one Adrien Baillargeon and his superhero status as a wrestler and a Francophone cultural icon transcended the other, more mundane realities of race, culture, and ethnicity. Thus, when people heard my last name, they would always ask if I was related to Baillargeon the wrestler. Then, they would share their stories with me. One comment, in particular, crystallized for me my father's role as a socio-cultural icon and as a superhero for the Acadian people. In an email to me from Warren Perrin, former President of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana, he remembers my father in this way: "My memory of your Dad was one of being so proud to see someone on live TV--Channel 10 every Saturday afternoon--who was a hero figure AND spoke French. He inspired many young Cajuns to feel good about being part of a shared heritage: Francophones."

18 Mr. Warren's words reconfirm the Acadian's image of my father as both the superhero and the socio-cultural icon. I can reconfigure that thought in the Hollywood manner by summarizing my father's image in this way: Papa fought with might for something right.

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